Count of spring chinook shaping up as one of best in 30 years

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PORTLAND, Ore. – The tally of adult spring chinook at Bonneville Dam is the largest in more than 20 years for this date. The high fish counts could add up to one of the best years for Columbia River spring salmon since the strong returns of the 1970s.

Scientists say Mother Nature has cooled down parts of the Pacific Ocean where these fish mature, increasing the odds of survival for the fish. An improved climate also enhances the results of human efforts to improve the fresh water stages of the salmon's life cycle.

"Some very encouraging news is coming from the fish counters at Bonneville Dam," said Larry Cassidy, chairman of the Northwest Power Planning Council. "The jack count last spring told us this would be a good run, but it is far greater than we predicted." In fact, jacks are returning at six times the 10-year average.

Jacks are smaller salmon that return after only a year at sea. They are precursors of their spawning class, which matures and returns after 2-4 years in the ocean. The count at Bonneville Dam includes both wild and hatchery fish. It will be several months before fish counts in the spawning habitat in the tributaries verify how much spawning escapement improved for individual wild stocks.

As of April 20, the counting station at Bonneville – the lowest dam on the Columbia River – tallied nearly 60,000 adult spring chinook, which is almost three times the most recent 10-year average count of 23,000. Last year through April 20, only 7,000 of the salmon had passed this gateway dam.

The count is on track to beat the 1960's average of 91,536 spring chinook, and could be close to the 10-year average of the 1970's --115,280 salmon. Harvest of salmon below Bonneville Dam in the 1960s makes direct comparisons of the runs difficult, but this year's return is excellent in any case, the biologists say.

"This run shows just how important ocean conditions are in the life cycle of the salmon," said Judi Johansen, BPA administrator. "But we shouldn't fool ourselves by thinking nature will do the work for us. The ocean won't yield fish unless we continue to vigorously address the other causes of decline -- harvest, habitat, hatcheries and hydro operations."

Scientists say several El Nino events warmed the Pacific in recent years, killing off the plankton and other sea life critically important in the food chain of salmon. Under good conditions at sea, 3-6 percent of the juvenile salmon that migrate to the Pacific return as adults to spawn in the Columbia River.

"We don't know how long this good fortune will last," Cassidy said. "Several good years would show us how well we've been doing in our efforts to restore spawning habitat and increase production of wild fish in the river without the distortion of heavy losses at sea." Both wild fish and hatchery stocks are returning, he added.

The public can observe the bumper crop of salmon close-up through windows affording an under-water view at Bonneville Dam. Visitors' centers are located on both the Oregon and Washington shores, and are open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day. To schedule media visits, call the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Public Affairs Office at (503) 808-4510.

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